HISTORY OF THE SOIL CONSERVATION SERVICE

Soil erosion as a menace to the agriculture of the United States received formal recognition in 1929 when the Buchanan Amendment to the Agricultural Appropriation Bill for the Fiscal year 1930 (Public No. 769, 70th Congress, February 16, 1929) was adopted by Congress. The Amendment provided $160,000 to be used by the Secretary of Agriculture in conducting soil erosion investigations. During the same year regional soil erosion experiment stations were set up on carefully selected erosion and agricultural type areas under the direction of the Bureau of Chemistry and Soils in cooperation with the Bureau of Agricultural Engineering. A portion of the funds appropriated for this work was assigned to the Forest Service to supplement and carry on research work which had been under way for several years to study the influence of forest cover on runoff. (See Hearings on Agricultural Appropriation Bill for 1931, House of Representatives, 71st Congress, Second Session, pp. 408-429).

The Agricultural Appropriation Act for the fiscal year 1932 (Public No. 717, 71st Congress, February 23, 1931) contained an appropriation of $330,000 specifically to enlarge the activities of the erosion and water conservation research stations, ten of which were established. New information with respect to both the erosion process and methods of control were rapidly acquired on these stations.

Further impetus was given soil erosion studies when in June 1933 Congress passed the National Industrial Recovery Act (Public No. 67, 73rd Congress) which provided in Section 202 b, for erosion control work as a means to unemployment relief. Three months later, September 19, 1933, the Soil Erosion Service was established without formal departmental order as a temporary agency of the Department of the Interior to carry out the provisions of the National Industrial Recovery Act relating to the prevention of soil erosion, and to administer expenditure of Public Works Administration allocations for this purpose. H. H. Bennett was appointed Director of the Soil Erosion Service, and for approximately 18 months of operation under the Department of the Interior an extensive demonstrational program was put into effect throughout the country. Forty-one soil and water conservation demonstration projects were established and about 50 Civilian Conservation Corps camps were assigned to erosion control work under supervision of the Soil Erosion Service.

Funds, personnel, property and equipment of the Soil Erosion Service were transferred to the Department of Agriculture by an Administrative Order, signed by the Federal Emergency Administrator of Public Works on March 23, 1935, and approved by the President on March 25, 1935. (This Administrative Order cited Executive Order No. 6252 of August 19, 1933, and Executive Order No. 6929 of December 26, 1934 as authority for the action).

On March 27, 1935, the Secretary of Agriculture, by Department Memorandum No. 665, ordered the consolidation, to become effective April 1, 1935, of all Department of Agriculture erosion-control activities. This order automatically expanded the organization to include the erosion-control experiment stations of the Bureau of Chemistry and Soils and the

Bureau of Agricultural Engineering, the erosion nurseries of the Bureau of Plant Industry, and the Emergency Conservation Work camps previously assigned to the Forest Service for erosion-control work on agricultural lands.

In the meantime several Congressional Committees were considering legislation to create a permanent Federal Agency for soil-erosion control. As a result, on April 27, 1935, and following passage by both Houses without a dissenting vote, the President approved the Soil Conservation Act of 1935 (Public No. 46, 74th Congress). This law specifically established within the Department of Agriculture a "Soil Conservation Service" for the development and prosecution of a long-time program of soil and water conservation. Since the law provided that existing facilities should be used in the formation of the new Service, the Acting Secretary of Agriculture in Memorandum No. 673, April 27, 1935, ordered that the Soil Erosion Service become the Soil Conservation Service with status as a regular bureau of the Department.

Gradual broadening of the program began with the transfer of 150 Civilian Conservation Corps camps from the Forest Service and assignment of more than 300 additional camps to the Soil Conservation Service in the summer of 1935 in order to extend demonstrations to wider areas. In the Omnibus Flood-Control Act of June 1936 (Public No. 738, 74th Congress) Congress delegated both the Secretary of War and the Secretary of Agriculture to prosecute a national flood-control program. To carry out the Department of Agriculture's portion of this program, the Secretary, in a Memorandum to Bureau Chiefs, dated November 30, 1936, delegated joint responsibility to the Forest Service, the Bureau of Agricultural Economics, and the Soil Conservation Service. Subsequently the Service participated in a cooperative program relating to waterflow retardation measures on upstream farm and range lands. Work accomplished before the war had to do largely with the preliminary and detailed surveys required in advance of actual remedial operations.

During August 1937, the Soil Conservation Service began cooperating actively with soil conservation districts organized by farmers under State Laws. This action was taken in order to follow through with basic principles for soil conservation work on agricultural lands of the United States as laid down in the Report of the Secretary's Committee on Soil Conservation, approved by the Secretary on June 6, 1935. The Committee had recommended, and the Secretary had approved "that on and after July 1, 1937. . . all erosion control work on private lands, including new demonstration projects, be undertaken by the Soil Conservation Service only through legally constituted soil conservation associations." From that date, therefore, the work of the Service began to change from a demonstrational character to a program designed primarily to lend assistance to farmers and ranchers in soil conservation districts, and to cooperate with such districts to the limit of the agency's available resources.*

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* As of October 1, 1947, Soil Conservation District Acts had been adopted by all 48 states, Puerto Rico, the Virgin Islands, Hawaii, and Alaska. Farmers and ranchers had organized 1,914 soil conservation districts and 23 other conservation districts, including 1,030,225,189 acres and 4,538,887 farms and ranches. The Soil Conservation Service cooperates with these districts, furnishing, on request by the districts to the Department of Agriculture for assistance, chiefly technical assistance, loan of equipment, and certain planting materials not readily available through commercial sources but needed for demonstration purposes.

In July 1938, the Secretary of Agriculture directed the Soil Conservation Service to participate with the Bureau of Agricultural Economics and the Farm Security Administration in the water facilities program as authorized by the Pope-Jones Act of 1937 (Public No. 399, 75th Congress). (See Water Facilities Board General Memorandum No. 2). The work consisted of helping farmers and ranchers in low-rainfall areas of 17 western States in building up water supplies through new installations, repair or enlargement of existing facilities, and developing conservation management plans for the farms and ranches where the work was carried on.

On October 6, 1938, the Secretary of Agriculture announced a realignment of Department functions and specifically assigned to the Soil Conservation Service (1) the land-utilization program authorized by Title III of the Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenant Act (Public No. 210, 75th Congress) previously administered by the Bureau of Agricultural Economics, (2) drainage and irrigation investigations formerly conducted by the Bureau of Agricultural Engineering, and (3) certain action phases of the Cooperative Farm Forestry Program authorized by the Norris-Doxey Act of 1937 (Public No. 95, 75th Congress). (See Secretary's announcement of Departmental Reorganization, dated October 6, 1938, and related memoranda. See also Departmental Memorandum No. 785 for information on (1) and (3) above.) This served to consolidate in a single agency all erosion, flood-control, and related activities involving actual physical work on farmlands, predominantly agricultural watersheds, and certain other areas.

On April 19, 1940, Reorganization Plan No. IV, (prepared by the President and transmitted to Congress pursuant to provisions of the Reorganization Act of 1939, approved April 3, 1939) announced, along with other changes in governmental structure, the transfer to the Department of the Interior of functions, moneys, property and personnel of the Soil Conservation Service with respect to soil and moisture conservation operations on lands under the jurisdiction of the Department of the Interior. This transfer involved work, except research studies, previously carried on by the Soil Conservation Service on public lands such as Indian Reservations in the West.

On February 23, 1942, following this country's entrance into war, by Executive Order No. 9069, the Soil Conservation Service, with the Agricultural Adjustment Administration, Federal Crop Insurance, and the Sugar Division, was made part of an agricultural Conservation and Adjustment Administration for the war's duration and six months following its termination. (See also Department Memorandum 960 of December 13, 1941, under which the Secretary had effected the same consolidation).

On December 5, 1942, by Executive Order No. 9280, the Soil Conservation Service became a part of the Food Production Administration when the Agricultural Conservation and Adjustment Administration, Farm Credit Administration, Farm Security Administration, Farm Management and Costs Division of the Bureau of Agricultural Economics, and the food production divisions of the Office of War Relations were brought together in the framework of the production organization. (See also Secretary's Memorandum 1054 of December 10, 1942, and Supplement 2 to Memorandum 1054, dated January 22, 1943, assigning responsibilities as to units affected by Executive Order No. 9280).

The Service's soils inspection and correlation work was transferred to the Bureau of Plant Industry by Secretary's Memorandum No. 1020, dated June 23, 1942.

Effective July 1, 1942, as specified in Secretary's Memorandum No. 969 of January 12, 1942, work of the Service under the Water Facilities Act of 1937 was transferred to the Farm Security Administration.

Soil Conservation Service activities under the Farm Forestry Act were expanded to include the Prairie States Forestry Project by authorization of the Secretary's Memorandum of June 30, 1942. This consolidated within the Service the supervision of shelterbelt planting and of related conservation activities of farmers and ranchers in soil conservation districts in prairie-plains areas.

On April 19, 1943, the Soil Conservation was made part of the War Food Administration through the further consolidation of the Food Production Administration, the Food Distribution Administration, Commodity Credit Corporation, and the Extension Service. This was effected by Executive Order No. 9322 of March 26, 1943, as amended by Executive Order No. 9334 of April 19, 1943.

The Soil Conservation Service became an independent agency under the War Food Administration January 21, 1944.

In accordance with General Departmental Circular No. 39, issued May 2, 1944, the Service established a new Water Conservation Division June 30, 1944, "to provide facilities for appropriate consideration of proposed activities and operations, together with related research, in the water conservation, utilization, and disposal fields and to make these facilities available to other agencies of the Department which have responsibilities for action activities in these fields."

The functions, funds, personnel, and property of the Office of Production relating to soil conservation and land-use activities were transferred to the Service by Revision 1 of Administrator's Memorandum 27, December 13, 1944. The transfer was effective January 1, 1945, with the Soil Conservation Service assuming the responsibilities of formulating policies and developing standards and criteria to guide War Food Administration agencies in matters pertaining to conservation, development, and use of soil and water for war production.

Administrator's Memorandum 27, Revision 1, Amendment 6, March 30, 1945, transferred to the Soil Conservation Service all functions of the Farm Security Administration relating to the water conservation and utilization programs of the War Food Administration in the Great Plains and arid and semiarid areas of the United States. These programs were authorized by the Case-Wheeler Act of August 11, 1939, as amended, and the item entitled "Water Conservation and Utility Projects" in the Interior Department Appropriation Act, 1940, as supplemented and continued available by subsequent legislation. The transfer was effected July 1, 1945.

Functions authorized by the Cooperative Farm Forestry Act of May 18, 1937, and administered by the Soil Conservation Service, were transferred to the Forest Service, together with the property purchased from the

Norris-Doxey funds primarily concerned with the functions transferred. This transfer, in accordance with General Departmental Circular 67, dated June 20, 1945, became effective July 1, 1945.

The Soil Conservation Service, however, on recommendation by the Budget Bureau on July 1, 1942, and by mutual agreement within the Department, accepted the responsibility for completing liquidation of the Prairie States Forestry projects and carrying on windbreak plantings as a part of the integrated program of the Service in cooperation with soil conservation districts.

When the War Food Administration was terminated by the President's Executive Order 9577, June 29, 1945, the Soil Conservation Service continued its functions as an independent agency directly responsible to the Secretary.

Flood control work, which had been suspended for the duration of the Second World War as of July 1, 1943, was resumed by the Service in 1945. Under the Flood Control Act of 1944 (Public Law 534, December 22, 1944, 78th Congress, 2nd session) the Service was authorized to apply special treatment for flood control on eleven watersheds embracing nearly 16 million acres of farm land in twelve states. The operations on all of the 11 watersheds are carried on in cooperation with soil conservation districts and other local and state organizations. The Service also resumed flood control surveys and investigations on additional watersheds, in cooperation with the Forest Service, to determine whether flood control measures would produce benefits in excess of costs, and to develop a remedial program for each area. As of July 1, 1947, preliminary examinations had been completed on 154 watersheds, and it was estimated that the application of waterflow retardation and soil erosion prevention practices in 124 of these watersheds would result in a substantial reduction of floodwater and sediment damages.